Unitarian Horizons

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SWANS IN WINTER

PUBLIC opinion is a powerful force, and not least powerful when it is based upon nothing more solid or substantial than sheer sentimentalism.

A few weeks ago, I was standing on the campus of a famous college of agriculture in the Middle West, admiring the swans swimming about on a lovely artificial lake in the clear, cool sunshine of an early fall afternoon. The man beside me happened to be one of the principal teachers in con-

nection with the college farm, and he smiled when I expressed my pleasure in seeing the swans. "Pretty soon now," he said, "we shall have to take those swans away from this part of the campus and put them into winter quarters up at the poultry farm. And we shall do it under the pressure of public opinion."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What has public opinion to do with it?"

"Everything," he replied, with another smile that seemed to me a bit rueful. "As a matter of fact, the swans would be better off, and happier, if we let them stay right here all winter. Up at the poultry farm, they always stay outside and, when they get the chance, sleep in the snow — by preference. But the college office would be literally bombarded with protests, increasing in violence and righteous indignation, if we should leave them out on the lake here where people could see them. In the end we should be obliged to yield anyhow, so we take them in as soon as the deluge starts. I expect it to begin any day now, and the swans will join the ranks of the victims of a sentimental public."

MORAL INDIGNATION

I WAS sorely tempted to embark upon a prolonged argument with the professor — but he had to hurry off to a class, and I was left alone to carry on the conversation by myself. I

wanted to ask him why it was necessary to submit to the pressure of any such uninformed body of public opinion. I wanted to ask him what had happened to the moral courage of the college authorities. I wanted to ask him why someone didn't organize a campaign of education to enlighten the public as to the facts about swans and their preferences, calling in the expert help of the department of political science and the department of psychology and the department of journalism. Here was a real opportunity for the students of the technique of modern propaganda to show what they could do in the interests of a thoroughly good cause!

And then something clicked inside my head, and I realized that I had fallen victim to the very sentimentalism I was condemning in the general public. I was working up a first-class case of moral indignation against the stupidity of the public, with no more real justification than lay behind the demand that the "cruelty" to the swans be stopped. Very decidedly, the laugh was on me; and I was glad the professor had had to go to his appointment!

DID IT REALLY MATTER?

AFTER all, what real difference did it make? The swans would undoubtedly be almost equally happy in either place, and the only loss would be that the public would miss the fun

of seeing them during the winter. In itself, the incident wasn't worth getting excited about. A smile at the expense of a stupid public opinion, and then let it be forgotten!

But nevertheless the incident stuck in my mind, with the uncomfortable pertinacity of a burr in a dog's ear. Trivial in itself, it began to take on importance as a symbol of the power of sentimentalism in matters of very much more consequence than the comfort or convenience of a few swans. The more I thought about it, the more significant it became.

SENTIMENTALISM IN EDUCATION

TAKE education, for example. If you talk with the men who are responsible for the administration of any of our huge midwestern universities, you will find that they are well-nigh swamped by the tremendous tide of young men and women who demand that they be given a university education, whether they are capable of receiving such an education or not; and behind this demand is an almost irresistible body of public opinion. To deny anyone the right to a college education is "un-American." To require that a student shall demonstrate his capacity to benefit by the privilege of higher education before lavishing public money upon the experiment, is "undemocratic." Such thinking seems to me to rest upon sentimentalism of the most flagrant

sort, yet its actual influence in determining the course of educational policies in this country is terrific. And this is only one example out of many that show the power of public opinion based on sentimentalism to prevent our educational leaders from taking a realistic attitude toward their problems.

OR TAKE OUR CHURCHES

THE same thing is true in the field of organized religion. Consider the matter of admitting candidates to our divinity schools. You will remember the old story of the young man who turned up and asked to be admitted to a theological seminary. The head of the school asked him why he wanted to be a minister, and the youngster replied that he had had a vision in which he had seen the letters "P. C." shining in dazzling splendor in the sky. When he was asked what he thought they meant, he replied that the obvious interpretation was "Preach Christ." But the wise dean of the school, after carefully studying the young man's qualifications for the ministry, said he believed the true interpretation of the divine enigma was "Plant Corn."

Well, it is still too often assumed that the impulse to preach is a sufficient reason for embarking upon the arduous and exacting profession of the ministry, and that any young man who thinks he

has a call to the service of the church is entitled to receive every assistance that will make his way smooth and easy. To be realistic about selecting and rejecting candidates for the ministry is always a difficult business, for public opinion in most denominations is prone to back up with sentimental enthusiasm the policy of giving any earnest and obviously sincere applicant "the benefit of the doubt."

RECRUITING THE MINISTRY

WE are just emerging, in our Unitarian fellowship, from a period when it was necessary to take active measures to increase the number of men entering the ranks of our ministry. We called the process "recruiting," and for a good many years some of our very ablest men gave themselves with the most unselfish devotion to this particular task.

But that period is now over. If you examine the Unitarian Year Book you will find that we no longer have a Committee on Recruiting the Ministry. We have completely changed our policy. It is no longer a question of discovering men who might enter our ministry and then looking for means by which they might be "recruited." It is now a question of selection, of determining first how many men we really need at any given time, and then of choosing, out of the larger number who are willing and eager to

come in, those who seem to be best fitted and most promising.

The change in policy has not been quite so abrupt as perhaps this may sound, and the work of recruiting the ministry has, of course, always been in part a matter of extremely careful selection. Nevertheless, the fact that we can now drop the word "recruiting" is a symptom of a profound change in the general situation, and a change which is of far-reaching importance. It means that we can be much more realistic, much more strict and searching in our policy, with regard to admitting men to our ministry.

OUR DEPARTMENT OF THE MINISTRY

IF there is any place in the whole world where sentimentalism is both dangerous and iniquitous, I should say it is in the selection of ministers for Unitarian churches. I know no calling which is at the same time so hazardous and so rigorous in its demands. To let a man dedicate his life to the Unitarian ministry whose qualifications and training are in any respect below a very high standard seems to me utterly unfair and cruel, so far as the man himself is concerned, and the height of folly from the point of view of the church. If anywhere, here is the place for wise and sober judgment, uncontaminated by any suspicion of sentimentalism.

Now the recently organized Department of the Ministry, with Dr. George F. Patterson as its Director, is preparing itself to approach the whole question of our Unitarian ministerial personnel in just this realistic spirit; and I have the highest hopes for its success. But we shall need the backing of public opinion throughout the denomination if this department is to maintain its realistic point of view. We must have the active support of Unitarians everywhere who are prepared to think without sentimentality about the kind of ministers our churches need. If the right thing is to let the swans stay out all winter — if that is best for them and best for everyone concerned — then we must be able to count upon a body of Unitarian opinion that will not let sentimental moral indignation take the place of common sense. Knowing a good many Unitarians pretty well, I don't believe it is unreasonable to expect just such backing.

F. M. E.

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